The Paradox of Flexibility: Guilt, Regret, and Work/Life Balance for Today’s Mother

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Abstract
Full-time, part-time, and stay-at-home mothers face a continuous struggle to achieve work/life balance. Using a multi-research methodology, this study gathered questionnaire and interview data to understand the plight of these working women types. Work/life balance, family guilt, and career regret were assessed to understand, what, if any options are available for working mother types and what kinds of emotional outcomes they might experience as a result of their choices. This study reveals that the choice to be a part-time working mother is most problematic. In fact, results indicated that they experience more family guilt and more career regret than the other two working mother types (full-time working and stay-at-home mothers) Moreover, interviews conclusions suggest that a social support network is crucial to achieving work/life balance, and that the “having it all” standard is difficult to accomplish. This study also explores the future directions of research per the study’s findings and implications.

“It’s baloney. You can’t.”

– Mary, on “having it all”

In the 45 years since second wave feminist Betty Friedan penned the seminal *The Feminine Mystique*, society has witnessed widespread mother migration from home to office. Friedan’s thesis of feminine fulfillment ought to be heralded as complete and victoriously accomplished. According to the United States Department of Labor, women constitute a full
46% of the American workforce today, and by 2016 women are projected to account for 47% of the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). Of the types of occupations held by women in 2007, 39% work in management, 34% work in sales, 20% work in service industries, 6% in transportation and material moving industries, and 1% in the natural resources, construction, and maintenance industry (U.S. Department of Labor). By these measures, it is clear that women are and will continue to be a dominant presence in organizational life. Additionally, the child-per-household ratio, while declining somewhat since the 1970’s, has remained relatively stable. According to U.S. Statistics, the average American household has 1.81 children (United States Census Bureau, 2007). Understandably, the migration has left women with salient issues of performance and balance concerns. And the ability to do both well is perhaps debatable. As a result, some households have (likely for a variety of reasons) opted to have the mother stay-at-home full time, or only work on a part-time basis. Regardless of the choice, it is likely that mothers experience emotional distresses associated with issues of work/life balance. Farley-Lucas (2000) suggests that women must negotiate the visibility of their mother status within the workplace depending on the perceived attitude of their supervisors toward family responsibilities. Working mothers who perceive their supervisors enacting unsupportive behavior towards families will consciously reduce their mother status in the work place. Furthermore, Farley-Lucas (2000) reports that for women to be viewed as competent professionals, they were best professionally served if they hid or masked their mother identities. Work/life balance studies reveal that working mothers use micro-practice strategies on a daily basis to juggle the plural roles they assume (Medved, 2004). Strategies like connecting, which involve a coordination of work/life goals such as planning childcare pickup via the work telephone, are high-maintenance and sensitive to even the minutest slip of alignment. The implications for imbalance negatively
impact a woman’s ability to effectively participate in the interrole juggling necessitated by the dual nature of a working mother (Williams et al., 1991). Extant literature on working mothers—whether in, out or partially out of the house—illustrates that the tensions of work/life balance remain unresolved in reference to interrole juggling, and that particular emotional constraints associated with the decision to work and at what level and type are doggedly present in the lives of these mothers (Williams et al., 1991).

The purpose of this study is to explore the emotional entanglement associated with work/life balance of three different types working mothers. To be clear, “working” includes all mothers. However, the types are distinguished by the amount of time spent in and out of the house. As a result, mothers are categorized as one of three working mother types: a) full-time out of the house; b) part-time in the house/part-time out of the house; or c) full-time in the house. In particular, this study seeks to ascertain which group experiences the best balance, the least amount of guilt and the least amount of regret in their lives as it relates to their jobs and children.

Scholarship on work/life balance and the emotional distress it creates for mothers is quite comprehensive with findings on a cross section of affecting variables such as perceived supervisor support (Farley-Lucas, 2000) and occupational level in terms of interdependence, responsibility for others, and interpersonal conflict (Dierdorff & Ellington, 2008). Yet, it is unclear if mothers experience other kinds of emotion associated with decisions of staying at home or working outside the home. In fact, the literature indicates a dearth of emotional regret associated with “giving up” important elements in a woman’s life.

Given the burgeoning presence of women in the workplace and the relatively stable birth rate, current work/life balance research necessitates further studies that explain familial and workplace implications that address precisely how the levels of emotion interact with working
mother types. The mindful juxtaposition of work/life balance, regret, and guilt should yield a clear answer to the purpose of thesis and respond to the following query: *Can working mothers achieve successful balance and if so, at what emotional costs?*

This study begins with a brief overview of pertinent literature addressing the current conclusions of working, part-time, and stay-at-home mothers culminating in the specific research question and hypotheses of the study, a section detailing a multi-research methodology, a section reviewing the results and conclusions of the data, and their implications as well as a brief explanation of this study’s limitations and a call to action for future research in this field.

**Literature Review**

The nature of this thesis demanded an exploration of literature in the areas of stay-at-home mothers, working mothers, and mothers working part-time. In particular, working mothers—regardless of the type—appear to experience gains and losses associated with the switching of roles. Given the juxtaposition of the escalating position of women in the modern workforce and the steady level of birthrates in the U.S. (68.5 births per 1,000 woman, National Center for Health Statistics, 2006), we can assume that difficulties cited in previous studies on work/life balance among working women will persist. An examination of extant literature on the issues of work/life balance, guilt, and regret is necessary to determine a proper research course.

*Balancing Work and Life for the Professional Mother*

Recent scholarship has taken an interest in understanding, and even measuring the balance between work and the home/personal life of working mothers. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define work/life conflict as, “role pressures from the work and family domains [that] are mutually incompatible in some respect” (p. 77). Thus, a work/life balance definition would
support a harmonization of said work and family role pressures. Edwards (2007) used a four-item scale developed by Frone, Russell, and Cooper and measured the work/life balance capacity for employed mothers. In his study, Edwards (2007) found that 46% of working mothers expressed frustration at the fact they did more housework than their husbands although 30% kept these frustrations silent rather than discussing them with their husbands. Findings indicated that when women discussed household and childcare responsibilities, one-third reported that their husbands responded in a positive manner, and that 60% of these husbands took affirmative action. Edwards (2007) also found a positive relationship between a women’s level of self, family, and job satisfaction and the amount of support from her husband. Moreover, Williams, Suls, Alliger, Learner, and Wan (1991) studied working mothers’ work/life balance in terms of parent, social, and work roles and discovered that interrole juggling negatively impacted women’s moods: when attempting to fulfill roles simultaneously, women reported lower role performance satisfaction. Spillover effects (a single mood that carried over into the next day) were also a factor. Women experiencing difficulty with one role usually reported a negative satisfaction rating for their entire day (Williams et al., 1991).

Hill et al. (2006) were concerned with the work/life balance of parents working a combined 60-hour work week. Hill et al. (2006) examined married couples that had at least one parent working full-time or part-time. The work combination for these couples included couples both working full-time, those working a combined 60-hour week, or those with a single parent employed full-time while the other parent was not employed at all. They found that couples whose work week did not exceed 60 hours reported more job flexibility, greater family life satisfaction, less organizational commitment and less job performance.

Higgins, Duxbury, and Johnson (2000) also examined the effects of work/life balance for
part-time working mothers. Overall, Higgins et al. (2000) found that part-time working mothers had higher levels of work-family balance than full-time mothers. In light of this finding, this study also sought to test Higgins et al.’s (2000) finding in quantitative form. Higgins et al. (2000) also reported that part-time working mothers were generally less stressed at work (due to fewer responsibilities), happier, and able to spend more time with the family. In sum, the reports of their findings suggest a real benefit to being at home part-time and having the ability to work part time (as compared to other working mother types perhaps).

In contrast to issues of work/life balance issues, Jacob (2008) studied the definition of “preferred work situations” according to working mothers. Jacob (2008) found three major conclusions: 1) mothers in full time positions were less likely to call their positions preferred while part-time or non working mothers were more likely to affix a “preferred” label to their positions; 2) mothers who were not in their preferred positions reported that greater work flexibility would make them happier and; 3) mothers not in their preferred work position reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Taken together, work/life balance studies are suggesting the part-time working mother as an optimal model, and therefore, this study’s first hypothesis suggests:

H1: Part-time working mothers will report experiencing significantly better work/life balance than will full-time working mothers and stay-at-home mothers.

Issues Concerning the Professional Working Mother

Terminology and connotation surrounding work/life balance is in itself ambiguous (Kirby et al., 2003; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Medved, 2004). Hoffman and Cowan (2008) argue that by using the frame “work/life” we dichotomize the legitimate options people have to fill their lives. Furthermore, optimal balance between one’s work and life responsibilities is rarely actually
defined. Therefore, the quest for balance is continues to be predicated with ambiguity.

Educated women who remain in the workforce with children at home experience similar feelings as educated women who transition into motherhood and decide to stay at home. For example, Rubin and Wooten (2007) examined ten highly educated stay-at-home mothers (all possessing at least one master’s degree) and found that the unifying theme between these women’s decision to stay at home was due to a desire to increase the time spent with family. Yet beyond the benefits, the major challenges these women faced included a loss of personal identity from professional mother to “just a mother,” and guilt for abandoning their professional lives (Rubin & Wooten, 2007, p. 341). Unexpectedly, Rubin and Wooten (2007) also discovered that self-enrichment was a critical component necessary in their lives. As educated women, it was important for them to take on activities that led to some kind of personal fulfillment individualizing themselves from their children and husbands.

Women who experienced a successful work life prior to becoming a mother express difficulty in doing either well simultaneously, and speak to the complex decision of having to choose one or the other. Stone and Lovejoy (2004) spoke with forty-two mothers who had garnered professional working experiences of at least thirteen years before deciding to stay at home full time. Consistent with Rubin and Wooten’s (2004) findings, these women cited three primary reasons for leaving the workforce: workplace difficulties, children, and husbands (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004,). Important to Stone and Lovejoy’s (2004) research was the notion that the rhetoric of “choice” for women has been oversimplified into a dichotomy of staying at home or working. In most cases, women did not feel like it was possible to do either well if done at the same time. In particular, interviewees cited inflexible workplace demands that refused to accommodate familial needs (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). In other words, the perceived rigidity of
the workplace directly affects a woman’s perceived level of comfort in the dual role of mother and worker. Furthermore, if a woman feels that her workplace is unwilling to meet her familial needs, the level of guilt she experiences her family life may increase, especially if she is unable to change her work situation due to extenuating circumstances (e.g. finances). In this case, the decision then for these women to transition to being a stay-at-home mother was often made gradually rather than suddenly, often “juxtaposing the two at critical junctures, for example, a company merger coinciding with their child's first year at school” (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004, p 80). Stone and Lovejoy’s (2007) research further unearthed a crop of “new traditionalists,” or mothers with the sole intention of staying at home regardless of personal career accomplishments or higher education: “For only five women (representing 16 percent of the sample) can the decision to step off the career track be viewed as a reflection of a relatively unconstrained choice or preference to become full-time, stay-at-home mothers” (p. 67).

Based on available literature, we know that working mothers currently struggle with the duality of their roles (Williams et al., 1991). We know that most working mothers perceive their working status as less than adequate (Hill et al., 2006, Higgins et al., 2000, Jacob, 2008) and that hiding or masking a motherhood role is a recommended strategy (e.g., Farley-Lucas, 2000). Furthermore, the “choice” for mothers to work full time or stay at home full time is problematized by finances, guilt, and regret (Stone & Lovejoy, 2007). What yet remains unclear is research that explains the long-term emotional and psychological effects of working mothers who are unable or unwilling to secure preferred working situations. Although briefly examined (Rubin & Wooten, 2007), current literature scantily approaches working mothers’ coping mechanisms for work/life balance issues. To better understand the emotional trappings of the dual role of working mothers and the work/life balance complications that are apt to arise during
a woman’s life, the following question is proposed:

RQ1: What options do mothers have in their work/life balance?

Emotional Outcomes Associated with the Professional Working Mother

In recent years, scholarship has examined the manifestation of particular emotions related to mothers working outside the home. One of the most common emotional outcome for working mothers is the guilt associated with the decision to work and not mother at home full time. Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994) conceptualize guilt as, “an aroused form of emotional distress that is distinct from fear and anger and based on the possibility that one may be wrong or that others may have such a perception” (p. 245). In a working-mother application, Elvin-Nowak’s (1999) research analyzed the manifestation of guilt in thirteen working mothers’ lives. She found guilt to be of a reoccurring nature, manifested toward immediate and extended family members, friends and coworkers (1999). Interestingly, the age of the mother as well as the cognitive mindset was related to the degree of guilt experienced (Elvin-Nowak, 1999). More specifically, younger working mothers who believed that working was important reported less guilt than older working mothers. This would then suggest that the importance mothers place on their career has a direct impact on the amount of cognitive dissonance mothers rationalize. Thus, the importance of studying the emotional effects of rationalizing interrole juggling becomes doubly important. Understandably then, guilt associated with the decision to be away from the home will be likely increase as a mother spends more time working outside the home rather than working in the home. Therefore in support of this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Full-time working mothers will report experiencing significantly more family guilt than will part-time working mothers and stay-at-home mothers.
Emotional Outcomes Associated with the Stay at Home Mother

The widest dearth of working mother type literature is analysis of regret. Zeelenberg and Pieters (2007) state that, “regret is experienced as an aversive state that focuses our attention on one’s own role in the occurrence of a regretted outcome” (p. 6). As previously cited, Stone and Lovejoy (2004) suggest the full-time stay-at-home mother experiences some degree regret in their decision to mother instead of pursue a career. Given the limited understanding of this construct, this study is particularly interested understanding if Stone and Lovejoy’s (2004) finding is common but by way of quantitative examination. Therefore given the small scope of research regarding stay-at-home mother guilt, the following hypothesis is under investigation: H3: Stay-at-home mothers will report experiencing significantly more regret about home life than will part-time working mothers and stay-at-home mothers.

Methodology

To respond to the research question and test the hypotheses, this study makes use of a multi-faceted methodological approach. As a result, it offers analysis in, and benefits from both qualitative and quantitative data (survey and interview format, respectively). This is due to an attempt to discover both broad scope themes with personal anecdotes supporting those themes as well as relational data examining differences among working mother groups (full-time out of the home, part-time out of the home, and full-time in the home). Methodology limitations will be discussed in a later section.

Preliminary Procedure

Prior to implementation of either the interview or survey, this study underwent the official approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board, which stipulated the
completion of a seven page research project application with the written approval of this study’s academic advisor and the attachment of all scales to be used in both the survey and interview formats of data collection. Additionally, the undergraduate researcher and project advisor completed a series of six training modules and their respective tests, detailing the university’s policies on ethical research habits.

Stage 1: Quantitative Research Methodology

Procedure and Participants

A Web-based survey was used for this study. Online surveys have several advantages including ease of sending and receiving replies, low cost and fast response, and wide reach (Tuten, Urban, & Bosnjak, 2002). Despite potential disadvantages (for a discussion see Tuten, Urban, & Bosnjak, 2002), an on-line survey was the best approach for this study.

Participants were obtained using a snowball sampling technique. Initially, participants were recruited via a social network sample. Both the researcher and the researcher’s project advisor sent an email requesting participation from all three working mother types in their friend and family network (See Appendix A). First level participants were also asked to forward the email with the survey link onto working mothers in their social network. The initial email was sent on Friday October 10, 2008. By the morning of Monday October 13, the standard survey limit for a free online account of ninety-nine (N=99) responses had been reached and the survey was subsequently closed.

Of initial ninety-nine surveys submitted, ninety-four (N=94) were valid. Four entries were removed because they were incomplete and one of the entries indicated conflicting working mother types and therefore could not be included in the group comparisons. As result, ninety-four surveys were used in the analysis. As expected, ninety-four (N=94) of the
participants were women (100%). The demographics of age range, working mother type, ethnicity, and education were analyzed. Four mothers fit into the 18-24 range (4%), thirty-six mothers were in the 25-34 range (38%), thirty mothers fit into the 35-44 range (33%), twenty-one mothers were in the 45-54 range (22%), and three mothers reported the 55-64 range (3%).

The ethnic representation of the study was dominated by eighty-seven Caucasian/White mothers (94%). One mother classified her ethnicity as other (1%), one mother was African American/Black (1%), two mothers were Hispanic (2%), and two mothers were Asian (2%).

Working mother types were represented chiefly by forty-eight full-time working mothers (52%). An equal number of part-time working mothers and stay-at-home mothers were represented: twenty-three (24%) and twenty-three (24%).

Finally, a 10-point categorization was created to determine highest extent of education. Nine mothers (9%) did not report any level of education. One mother (1%) reported achieving a high school diploma. Fourteen mothers (14%) received an associate’s degree, while fifteen mothers (16%) reported completing some bachelor’s coursework. Twenty-nine mothers (33%) held at least one bachelor’s degree, while three mothers (3%) had completed some amount of a master’s. Sixteen mothers (17%) held at least one master’s, and one mother (1%) was currently a PhD candidate. Six mothers (6%) held PhD’s.

*Instrumentation*

A series of instrument scales were created to measure the levels of balance and emotional effects of working mothers. In addition, participants were asked to complete a small set of demographic characteristics. (See Appendix B)

*Work/Life Balance Scale.* The ability to achieve work and life balance was measured using a 10-item scale wherein the items asked participants to think about the extent to which they
believed they were currently receiving what they needed in their work and personal lives and rated their responses using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Items included, “I feel supported emotionally by my husband,” or “I am able to interact equally with my children and my adult relationships.” The mean, standard deviation and alpha reliability for the perceptions of change communication quality scale were \( M = 3.28, SD = .048, \) and \( \alpha = .794. \)

**Guilt Scale.** Guilt levels were measured using a 3-item scale to determine if mothers felt guilty about the amount of time they concentrated on their home life. Participants rated their responses using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). An item included was, “I am able to give my child(ren) enough attention.” The mean, standard deviation, and alpha reliability for the family guilt scale were \( M = 2.27, SD = .006, \) \( \alpha = .541. \)

**Regret Scale.** A 2-item regret scale was built to assess the amount of guilt experienced by stay-at-home mothers. Again, participants rated their responses using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Items included, “I am personally happy with the decision I have made regarding my career,” and, “I feel I am efficiently using my degree(s).” The mean, standard deviation, and alpha reliability for the family guilt scale were \( M = 2.37, SD = .063, \) \( \alpha = .516. \)

**Demographics.** The survey included a section that recorded participant age, race, highest level of education, and working mother type. The demographic variables allowed the findings to be grouped into broad-base categories for analysis.

Relational data was analyzed in accordance with the hypotheses utilizing SPSS and are discussed in the results section.

**Stage 2: Qualitative Research Methodology**

Interviews were determined as the best way to fit the needs of the qualitative side of this
empirical investigation. Interviews are particularly appropriate to “[u]nderstand the social actor’s experience and perspective” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). In particular, interviews provide a useful method for understanding how working mothers are affected by issues and emotions surrounding their decision to work in or out of the home, or part time in each. Specifically, this method can provide information about the sense-making associated with working mother’s perceptions.

Data Collection and Participants

Prospective interviewees were garnered through a separate survey linked to the online survey as a platform for data collection. At the completion of the survey, a second survey link was attached on the end of initial survey, offering participants the voluntary opportunity to participate in an in-depth interview involving the same subject—work/life balance and working mother types. This second site asked survey participants to provide contact information in order to arrange for phone or face-to-face interviews. Following the survey completion, twenty-one mothers volunteered themselves as prospective interviewees.

The week of October 13 was spent calling fifteen of the aforementioned individuals and scheduling interview times for the following week. Out of the fifteen, a total of ten interviews were arranged and completed. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the interviews. The guide consisted of approximately seven main questions, as well as number of addition probes (See Appendix C). Eight interviews were performed via telephones and two were performed face-to-face. Interview time averaged between 15 and 20 minutes. The conversations were recorded and later transcribed by the undergraduate researcher, resulting in 54 single-spaced pages of interview data. Each interview transcript was analyzed in conjunction with the research question.
Data Analysis

Once the data was transcribed, the undergraduate researcher independently performed open coding (see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). An initial set of salient themes from the entries was identified in accordance with the research question. Carefully reading through each transcript and making notes in the margins created the themes. From there, the researcher engaged in the process of analytical induction (Bulmer, 1979; Huberman & Miles, 1994) to reduce data into concise and salient themes. Analytic induction is a reduction process of “sifting” data. This occurs by determining useful information necessary to answering the research questions. As such, data is either eliminated as irrelevant or information is combined with similar ideas. Data was reduced and grounded theory processes applied between group members in an effort to create and compare exhaustive categories to explain the data (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After coding for the research question, two main themes emerged and are discussed in the next section. Interviewee names were changed to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

Results

The findings and results of this study are detailed below in accordance to the respective research question or hypothesis. In this section, findings for the research question and the results of the hypothesis tests will be discussed in turn.

Research Question 1: What options do mothers have in their work/life balance?

The purpose of this question was to understand if mothers, regardless of working mother type, perceived having alternative options in their life—options that created some kind of desirable opportunity for them. Although the data captures outcomes of options for all three of the working mother types (full-time, part-time, and stay-at-home mothers), the dominance of the
full-time working mothers in this sample privileged this voice (see the limitations section for a discussion of this concern). Therefore, there are two macro discussions that address the researcher questions—(1) the themes that speak to all three working mother types and (2) the themes that are exclusive to full-time working mother only.

Umbrella 1: “Unified” Working Mother Themes about Motherhood Options

“I get by with a little help from my friends”

Of the two themes, the one most vocally iterated by all the interviewee was the invaluable nature of an adult partner and a network of friends’ support to the emotional health of mothers. Said Tina, “I was very blessed by finding him [my husband] and he's very supportive of whatever I want to do.” (line 225). Debra also echoed Mary’s sentiment, saying, “I tell you what if you've got a supporting husband, that's all that really matters.” (lines 109-10). Patricia, who has a husband in the military, praised her friend network, “I don't know how the women do it if they don't have a support system when your husband takes off [for military purposes]. Because you could really go crazy if you don't have someone there to talk to.” (lines 343-45). In each case mothers extolled the benefits of external support as a coping method for their work/life balance.

“Having it all is a myth”

A second theme transcending mothering categories spoke to the ideal of “having it all” and abstractly defined it as having the perfect family, job, and (sparkling clean!) house. This goal was seen by all participants as being unrealistically unattainable. As one mother said, “It’s baloney. You can’t” (Mary, line 140). Cheryl also cited the impracticality of the ideal: “Can you be like Supermom where you have wonderful deep relationships with your children and your family and your friends, and all the time to accomplish wonderful things in your work and [have]
time to volunteer and time to take care of yourself? I think that’s kind of impossible” (lines 248-51). Mothers were, however, more hopeful in their ability to fulfill their personal definition of having it all. Attributes of this “all” life included perceived satisfaction with family relationships between children and spouses.

Working mothers dominated the sample size of interview participants. From their interviews, two themes manifested involving finance as a motivator and job flexibility as a key to their perceived levels of balance.

Umbrella 2: Exclusive Full-Time Working Mother Themes about Motherhood Options

“We get by all right”

A preponderance of interviewees cited money as the deciding factor between working and staying home. Cheryl said, “We needed it economically, we needed to earn money” (lines 173-4). On the opposing scale of finances was the desire to spend more time with family. Said Mary, “My husband graduates in May and I can't wait because we're gonna go someplace and he's going to start working and we're [my kids and I] going to stay at home (lines 178-9).

While Mary looked forward to the day when she could spend more time with her children, Debra spoke emotionally on the transition from home to work after her child was born: “The most difficult part for me is that I miss her. That's what's most difficult” (line 168). This speaks to the conflicting desires of a number of full-time working mothers interviewed. Those who cited money as the overwhelming reason to work without mentioning career passion were most likely to express regret at leaving their children at home.

“It’s just school-compatible”

More than half of the full-time working mothers interviewed worked in some capacity in the field of education. On multiple occasions, mothers cited that they were comfortable with
working because their hours matched the hours their children were at school. Said Amanda, “I have a unique situation because I work in the same school where my daughter attends so I get to kind of combine those roles [of mother and worker]. I can go down and peek at her at lunch and say hi and check in the lost and found for the jacket she didn't bring home yesterday, pop in for her five minute presentation that she is giving about whatever they're doing. I can be there without really leaving work” (Amanda, lines 35-9). It seems that when involved in the field of education, mothers are apt to express more assurance in their decision to work.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 proposed that part-time working mothers will be better adjusted than the other two working mother types. Specifically it suggested that part-time working mothers will report experiencing significantly better work/life balance than will full-time working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. An ANOVA was used to test H1 and found no significant effect for part-time working mothers and their ability to balance work and life best. Therefore, H1 was not supported. However, a comparison of means revealed that, although not significant, part-time working mothers actually experienced the least amount of work/life balance of the three working mother types.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 sought to anticipate which group of mothers would experience the highest degree of guilt. Specifically, hypothesis 2 predicted that full-time working mothers will report experiencing significantly more family guilt than will part-time working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. As with the first, hypothesis 2 was not also supported. Using an ANOVA once again, there was no significant effect for full-time working mothers and the greatest family guilt A comparison of means however, indicated that part-time working mothers experienced the
highest amount of family guilt (as compared to the other two groups).

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis examined the regret stay-at-home mothers might feel towards giving up work, and suggested that *stay-at-home mothers will report experiencing significantly more regret about home life than will part-time working mothers and stay-at-home mothers*. An ANOVA revealed that hypothesis 3 was not supported but the comparison of means revealed that part-time working mother experienced the highest amount of regret about work.

Discussion

This study began with a general interest in understanding if about working mothers’ types experience different options about the choices in their lives as it concerned work and family and additionally posited three hypotheses on working mother types and their relationships with work/life balance, guilt about family, and regret about career. Working mother types were categorized into full-time, part-time, and stay-at-home mothers, and a literature review was reviewed highlighting the extant literature on work/life balance, mother guilt, and mother regret in an effort to understand possible work and home emotional responses to motherhood. The study’s findings offered two answers to answering RQ1 (what options do working mothers have in their work/life balance?). The answer to this question suggests an unclear picture and a negative reality. In particular, the first conclusion to work/life balance options suggested an ambiguous and varying—almost unclear understanding of the options women actually have which corroborates Elvin-Nowak’s (1999) finding that a mother’s personality holds a prominent place in reasoning away (or not) aversive emotions such guilt and regret. This answer is further supported by Hoffman et al.’s (2008) conclusion that work/life balance as a label is rarely
defined, thwarting the implementation of a working criteria to judge the balance achieved. A lack of unified work/life balance definition may be in some cases innocuous, however Hoffman et al. (2008) alluded to the danger of purposeful miscommunication of work and life definitions.

Hoffman et al.’s (2008) analysis of company websites for clarification on work/life yields a tip in the balance toward work rather than life. That a “life” definition is also neglected in corporate terminology speaks to a possible element of control companies may be apt to inflict on their employees (Hoffman et al., 2008). Perhaps the most salient implication of a lack of work/life balance definition is what Farley-Lucas (2000) calls the vocal marginalization of a woman’s identity of motherhood. Farley-Lucas (2000) reveals that women who perceive work family unfriendly environments will hastily mask their mother status. Perhaps a muted mother status in the workplace offers support for why this study found that a preponderance of women found comfortable and unproblematic careers in the field of education.

The second conclusion to RQ1 is rather disheartening. It appears that working mothers have very little viable work/life options. The most optimistic answer found in the qualitative research indicates women in the educational field report higher levels of work/life balance due to the general synchronization their work and their children’s school hours. This finding strikes a chord with Jacob (2008) who tells us that spending more time with their families relieved some amount of work/life balance anxiety. This study’s qualitative participants were involved in careers that did not demand late hours or weekend work. Perhaps these mothers felt their jobs in education provided a built-in guarantee for family time that is otherwise suspect in more hour-intensive careers such as law, medicine, or business. In both cases, the conclusions to this research question yield low satisfaction for these women. This perhaps bespeaks an innate, variable nature of emotional and coping responses in the tug-of-war between work and life.
responsibilities. This study however encouragingly found that participants recognized the necessity of a social support system (partner, extended family, friends, etc.), and that those women who had successfully tapped into social support as a coping mechanism reported a greater level of work/life balance.

Considering the findings that were not supportive of the initial three hypotheses may also substantiate the idea of work/life balance variability. H1 suggested that part-time mothers would perceive the greatest amount of work/life balance, H2 suggested that full-time working mothers would feel the most family guilt, and H3 suggested that stay-at-home mothers would express the most career regret. In each case, the hypothesis was rejected. Yet, beyond the lack of support for these contentions, this result highlighted continually pointed to the unyielding despair of the part-time working mothers. More specifically, part-time working mothers revealed that they feel aversively toward the very roles they are striving to balance. Moreover, they also report the most family guilt and the most work regret. The implications for this finding suggest that from the group of working-mother types, it is the part-time mothers who are in trouble. These women may be unfortunately torn between multiple roles in ways that prevent them from achieving success on any level. These are results are to be taken with caution since the results of this group do not indicate a significance difference than the other types (perhaps an issue limitations). However, this study signals concern for part-time working mothers and it suggests these working mother types have “the least of all.”

Higgins et al. (2000) and Hill et al. (2006) found support for part-time work based on their participants’ reported levels of higher personal happiness and lower life stress. Part-time working mothers associated the word flexibility positively with their personal work/life balance. Jacob (2008) also found that flexibility in work is often synonymous with part-time work:
“Mothers employed part-time, working for pay from home, or not employed were significantly more likely to be in their preferred work situations than mothers employed full-time” (p. 222). The women interviewed spoke often on the benefits they reaped from having a flexible work schedule. And qualitatively, part-time working mothers appear to confirm said findings. However, it is important to keep in mind that only one part-time mother was interviewed, which may not be sufficient to successfully discover variable experiences (e.g., perhaps an unusually satisfied part-time working mother).

However, this study also suggests an opposing image of part-time work. In fact, questionnaire data suggests that part-time working mothers do not appear to be balanced, nor do they seem to be able to achieve personal happiness. Thus the most revealing result of this study is the preliminary (and with reserve) conclusion it makes about the optimal choice of being a part-time working mother. In fact, the findings of H2 and H3 betray part-time working mothers’ rationalization. The results of this study then stand in stark contradiction in with literature supporting the positive option of part-time working mother lifestyles (Jacob, 2008; Hill et al., 2006; Higgins et al., 2000). This study rather indicates the presence of a paradox of flexibility for part-time mothers. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact part-time mothers must multi-task their work and home responsibilities. It can be suggested that multi-tasking is a difficult accomplishment that requires constant focus and motivation. Coupled with the difficulty of the multi-tasking nature of part-time work, research suggests the current attributed value of part-time work is perceived poorly by both employers and employees (Gossett & Goldstein, 2007; Gregory & Connelly, 2008). Gregory and Connelly (2008) specifically point to the phenomenon of downgrading, and found that when shifting from full-time to part-time work especially in the event of the birth of a child, the tasks relegated to women often a step down in career.
example, managers of hair hairdressing salons may transition into part-time work as a hairdresser (Gregory & Connelly, 2008). The combined effects of multi-tasking difficulties and the downgrade of work and their self-reported satisfaction could indicate that part-time mothers may be assuming the sacrificial banner of their working-mother type definition and cognitively rationalizing away their dissonant feelings. Moreover, Gossett and Goldstein (2007) argue that part-time work is not desirable or sustainable, suggesting that this segment of the workforce is often the first to be downsized and these workers are not treated as well as full-time members. The lack of support for H3 gives credence to Stone and Lovejoy (2007) who suggest the emergence of a new motherhood, the surfacing of a group of mothers known as “new traditionalists”, or highly educated mothers who make the conscious and stable choice to stay at home permanently. H3 supports the case for new traditionalists who are comfortable with their decision and thus feel no regret toward their work situation. As for full-time working mothers, H1 relates to Elvin-Nowak’s (1999) finding that cognitive mindset directly affects guilt. Again, based on H1’s rejection, this study’s brand of full-time working mothers appears to have a mindset that privileges financial need or security which may indeed be removing or reducing (or perhaps rationalizing) any trace of family guilt. This study’s findings thus suggest the need to understanding coping efficacy mechanisms for part-time working mothers to fill the void of the anguished voice of part-time working mothers. This study also suggests a paradox of flexibility, in which work/life balance cannot be defined as an even split between work and home. However, the implications of this study must be tempered with potential limitation. Nonetheless, the findings beckon further exploration.
Limitations

This study was not immune to design flaws. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies suffered in their shortcomings. Perhaps the most cogent error manifested quantitatively in respect to the reliability of the scales. Although the work/life balance scale reported a sufficient reliability (.794), the family guilt and work regret produced mediocre reliability scores. Both the family guilt scale and work regret scale barely tipped a reliability factor of 50 percent. Given the questionability of the two emotion measures, the rejection of H1, 2, and 3 perhaps may have been subject to a potential Type 1 error.

A further study limitation was the sample size acquired for both methodologies. The undergraduate researcher made a decision to cap the survey participants at 100 instead of paying the Web-based subscription fee to remove survey response limits. The representation of part-time and stay-at-home mothers, while equally captured, was disproportionate to the full-time working mother representation with 23 participants each. Hence, the findings based on this survey sample size may be anomalous based on a lack of power necessary for determining relational effects.

Additionally, only ten interviews were conducted. Seven mothers were worked full-time, one worked part-time, and two worked as stay-at-home mothers. While there are not issues of power with qualitative research, there is a need to see ample repetition. However, this sample size suffered a bit from saturation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002); and most concerning was the very limited sample size for part-time working mothers. As a result, the number of interviews made theme identification difficult. With the additional presence of more voices, some themes overlooked by the undergraduate researcher may have surfaced while conversely some identified for this study may actually be atypical.
This study’s findings and limitations invite future research to revisit the RQ and three hypotheses with an equally representative quantitative and qualitative sample sizes and more reliable scales. If the findings for the plight of the part-time working mother and the paradox of flexibility are maintained with the use of better scales, supplementary research steps will be consequently appropriate regarding the necessary coping mechanisms for the part-time mother. Furthermore, this study generates interest in determining the role fathers today play in a family’s work/life balance. A father focus on family research might yield a more complete picture of work/life balance for all parties involved.
References


Appendix A

Initial Email

Hello! My name is Esther Otis and I am a senior studying Communication Studies at Kansas State University. As part of my program, I am required to complete a research study. My particular thesis is concerned with the work and life balance of mothers.

Your participation in this study will benefit my senior project immensely. If you are interested, please “select” the link listed at the bottom of this message, and you will be directed to an anonymous online survey. On average, most participants are able to complete the survey in about ten minutes. Also, if you have other mom friends who might be interested in this survey, forwarding this email along would greatly benefit my research.

Thank you very much for your assistance!

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=g_2fL9tG0iKlE5CTmAdhV7w_3d_3d
Appendix B

Online Survey I

Welcome!

This online survey is completely anonymous, and will take about ten minutes to complete. Before you continue to the survey, please review the online consent form.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that by clicking to the next page that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described.

Please print and keep a copy of this page for your records and for future reference. If you have any concerns during the process, please contact the researcher.

Esther Otis
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or

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Thank you for your participation!
Part I: Statements
Please rate the following statements from 1 - 5 (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree).

1. I wish I had waited longer to have children. (regret)
2. I feel supported emotionally by my spouse. (balance)
3. My employer understands and supports my familial responsibilities. (balance)
4. I am able to give my child(ren) enough attention. (guilt)
5. I am satisfied with my current work schedule. (balance)
6. On average, I am able to comfortably accomplish tasks in my life. (balance)
7. Money has played a strong role in decisions I made about my career. (guilt)
8. I felt/feel overwhelming social pressure to stay at home/go back to work. (guilt)
9. I feel that I have sufficient “me time.” (balance)
10. I find myself playing catch-up on weekends. (balance)
11. My decision to work/stay at home is being overtly judged by family members. (guilt)
12. My spouse plays an equal role in parenting. (balance)
13. I feel I am able to interact equally with my children and my adult relationships. (balance)
14. Having children when I did has not impacted my work life in any way. (regret)
15. My spouse and I seldom fight about household duties. (balance)
16. I have a healthy line of communication with my spouse regarding the balance of my work, home and general life. (balance)
17. I feel I am efficiently using my degree(s). (regret)
18. I am personally happy with the decision I have made regarding my career. (regret)
19. I have a strong social network that supports me emotionally. (balance)
20. I wish that I could spend more time at home. (regret)
21. I wish that I could devote more time to my job. (regret)
22. The burden of running the household falls mostly on my shoulders. (balance)
23. My employer is generally content with my performance in the office. (guilt)
24. I feel like I made good decisions regarding my home and work life. (guilt)

Part II: Free Response
Please use the space provided to respond to the following questions.

1. What are your personal feelings about whether or not a mother’s place should be in the home?
2. In what ways has being a working mother (if applicable) affected your life (work, family, personal)?
3. In what ways has being a stay-at-home mother (if applicable) affected your life (work, family, personal)?
4. What, if anything, would you change about your WORK LIFE, FAMILY LIFE or PERSONAL TIME?

Part III: Demographics

Please indicate your ethnicity
- African American/Black
- Caucasian/White/European
Please indicate your age

Please indicate the degree(s) you hold

Please indicate your occupation

Out of 100%, please indicate the amount (or percent) of your time you spend working (outside of the home) versus the time you spend (working or staying) inside the home. Together, the numbers should add to 100%. For example, 35% working at home, 65% working away from the home.

Percent of time spent working at home ____%

Please indicate the percent of time spent working away from the home ____%

Please indicate which one of the following best represents
- Working Mother - Full time Stay-at-home mother
- Working Mother - Part-time job outside the home
- Working Mother - Full-time job outside the home

Please indicate the number of years you have been married
Please indicate how many children you have
Please indicate the age of your oldest child
Please indicate the age of your youngest child

Part IV: Conclusion

This completes the survey process. Thank you for your responses! I am also interested in speaking directly to mothers with varying working experiences. To do so, I will need to conduct short interviews. If you are interested in continuing to work with me on this project and would be willing to take part in a ten to fifteen minute phone or face-to-face interview, please click on the following link to enter your personal information.

<LINK>

Please note that this link is in no way tied to your responses. Your survey will remain anonymous.

If not, thank you again for your time and your input. You can exit this survey by selecting
“done.”

Survey II

Information for Voluntary Interview

Please list your name, the best phone number at which to reach you, and the best time for receiving calls.

Thank you for your interest!
Appendix C

Interview Schedule

Research Questions:

RQ1: What are the similarities of motherhood regardless of work choice? Differences?
RQ2: How many options do mothers have in their work/life balance?
RQ3: What does “having it all” mean, and how are both the positive and negative valences of this phrase assigned?

Demographic Questions:

Age, children, husband, classification of mother, degrees, profession

Protocol Questions:

(For working mothers)
- How smoothly are you able to transition between the roles of mother and worker? Are these roles determined spatially or mentally? Do you feel “stuck” in a particular role at times?
- How does both working and mothering make you feel about these different roles you assume?
- How would you describe your communication with your family and friends – and has this played a role in the balance in your life?
- What drove your decision to work in addition to motherhood?
  - In what way, if any, has family finances affected your decision?
- Do you believe that personal identity evolved since becoming a mother?
  - In what ways?
- How would your family compare to a 1950’s family stereotype (i.e. dad work’s 9-5, mom stays at home with the kids) in terms of household and parenting responsibilities?
- What are the sacrifices you’ve had to make for either your job or your family?
- Do you feel the media places any sort of expectations/judgments on the actions of mothers? If so, how have these expectations impacted you?
- Do you participate in community groups or activities? What are the reasons for your decision to be (or not to be) involved? How do you feel that these activities affect your life balance?
- Have you ever had to personally vindicate yourself to an individual who didn’t understand your parenting decision to NOT stay at home?
- What has been the biggest struggle for you related to your decision to work?
- What has been the largest reward?
- Do you think women can have it all?
  - Why or why not?
- Would you add anything else about the balance it takes to work and be a mother?
(For stay-at-home mothers)

- What drove your decision to be a full time mother?
  - In what way, if any, has family finances affected your decision?
- How does being a full time mother make you feel about the role you have/the role you/your family chose?
- How would you describe your communication with your family and friends – and has this played a role in the balance in your life?
- Do you believe that your personal identity has evolved since becoming a mother?
  - In what ways?
- How would your family compare to a 1950’s family stereotype (i.e. dad work’s 9-5, mom stays at home with the kids) in terms of household and parenting responsibilities?
- What are the sacrifices you’ve had to make for either your job or your family?
- Do you feel the media places any sort of expectations/judgments on the actions of mothers? If so, how have these expectations impacted you?
- Have you ever had to personally vindicate yourself to an individual who didn’t understand your parenting decision TO stay at home?
- Do you participate in community groups or activities? What are the reasons for your decision to be (or not to be) involved? How do you feel that these activities affect your life balance?
- What has been the biggest struggle for you related to your decision to be a full time mom?
- What has been the largest reward?
- Do you think women can have it all?
  - Why or why not?
- Would you add anything else about the balancing your life as a full time mom?